

Horses Teaching Humans About Leadership

Researchers are studying how horses assist humans in personal and professional growth and development.

If you were to ask students in any equine science and management program why they want to work in the horse industry, typical responses might include training race horses, working in the sport horse world, breeding, managing a stable, or becoming a veterinarian. Rarely do they mention a desire to collaborate with horses to teach humans about themselves, nor can they envision the horses they will work with becoming some of the best teachers for their own personal and professional development.

Yet men and women alike are drawn to working with horses for many reasons, some of which are not easily put into words. As Winston Churchill so aptly said: "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."

To fully understand this "something" requires us to experience the horse-human relationship from a completely different perspective.

"This notion of horses enlightening humans about themselves is a relatively new one," said Lissa Pohl, MA, program and outreach associate and researcher with the University of Kentucky's Center for Leadership Development in the College of Agriculture. "However, horses have much to teach us, and it's really changing that old paradigm of horses being the receivers of what people know, to people being the receivers of what horses know and how, together, we can create collaborative learning relationships."

Over the past two decades, the emerging field of Equine Assisted Activities (EAA) has seen explosive growth worldwide. As of 2008, more than 700 centers in the United States and several internationally recognized organizations provided some type of EAA program. In the United States this list includes the Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH), Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), Equine Guided Education Association (EGEA), EponaQuest, and Equine Experiential Education Association (E3A). These organizations teach, support, and certify interested individuals in

collaborating with horses for healing and human growth and learning purposes, a field better known as Equine Assisted Learning (EAL).

Yet, while there is growing interest in EAL programming worldwide, evidence that working with horses in a facilitated experiential learning situation actually changes a person's behavior is mostly anecdotal, and what little research exists in this field focuses mostly on the effectiveness of equine-human mental health therapies or on the physical therapeutic aspects of working with horses, known as hippotherapy. For EAL to gain

legitimacy, credible research looking into how horses assist humans in their own personal and professional growth and development is needed.

In the forefront of this quest for creating credibility in the Equine Assisted Learning field are researchers Patricia Dyk, PhD, director of the Center for Leadership Development, and Pohl, along with nurse researchers Carol Noriega, MSN; Janine Lindgreen, APRN; and Robyn Cheung, PhD, RN, from UK HealthCare, who recently completed a pioneering research pilot study titled "The Effectiveness of Equine Guided Leadership Education In Developing Emotional Intelligence In Expert Nurses."

"With Lexington being known as the Horse Capital of the World, it is only fitting that the University of Kentucky is conducting pioneering research in the emerging field of equine assisted learning," Dyk said.

The project included a control group of 10 nurses from the Neuroscience Surgery Service Line and an intervention group of 11 nurses from the Trauma and Acute Care Surgical Service Line at UK Chandler Hospital. At the start of the study and again six months later, both groups took an online assessment appraising emotional intelligence (EQ). Nurses in the intervention group participated in a one-day workshop that involved experiential learning with horses. Each exercise in the workshop was designed to develop the four emotional intelligence competency areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. These nurses also filled out written surveys after their experience to provide further information about which competency areas were being developed. In comparing the before and after results of the online EQ assessment, this pilot study showed that nurses who attended the workshop scored higher in all four competency areas when compared to the control group that did not. Though the pilot sample was small, qualitative responses from the nurses participating in the workshop clearly attribute changes in their bedside manner to lessons learned from interacting with the horses. One of the most common nurse statements was how the horse made them aware of the importance of their body language in communicating their thoughts,

emotions, and intentions to others. These initial results are encouraging, and they lay the groundwork for subsequent studies that are larger in scope and evaluate diverse populations.

This type of research not only offers credibility to professionals offering Equine Assisted Activities and those individuals and teams seeking this unique and effective personal and professional development experience, but it also repurposes these horses' lives.

